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ABSTRACT

Five models of independent learning are suitable for use in adult education programs. The common factor is a facilitator who works in some way with the student in the learning process. They display different characteristics, including the extent of independence in relation to content and/or process. Nondirective tutorial instruction and learning contracts provide two alternative approaches to classes for one-to-one teaching. The nondirective model works when students do not have a clear focus at the beginning and where an exploratory approach to the learning process is beneficial. The learning contract is particularly useful for students who have a clear sense of direction and wish to achieve specific goals. Tough and Griffin provide good models for group-based situations. Tough's "tip of the iceberg" model can be used where there is core material to be shared by all, while Griffin's emphasis is on group support. The competency-based model suggests that instruction can be flexible, particularly for learners at a distance. Correspondence materials can be made available on a learner-paced basis. This model can work only when people must have or desire specific skills. (A reference list is appended.) (YLB)

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INDEPENDENT LEARNING MODELS: A COMPARISON

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INDEPENDENT LEARNINGMODELS: A COMPARISON

The literature of adult education including authors such as Cross (1981), Tough (1979), Knowles (1975, 1986), Houle (1972), and others indicates clearly that many adults engage in self-directed or independent learning activities. This paper examines five models which exhibit different features of independent learning. The common factor in these models is that they include a facilitator who works in some way with the student in the learning process. The relationship may involve face-to-face and distance situations. The reader is invited to examine the models for potential utilization in their particular adult program.

All persons who work within independent learning models become quickly aware of certain facts. The first, and perhaps most important fact, is that independent learning does not require a lesser commitment on the part of resource persons. The role of the resource persons may differ, but independent learning is not a vehicle for the reduction of effort or resources. Educators who work in independent models of delivery must develop appropriate skills just as their counterparts in traditional models must do so.

It should also be clear that learners are seldom totally independent or dependent. They frequently require access to some resources whether they be human or material in order to gain new knowledge or skills. Furthermore, adults are seldom totally dependent as learners because they integrate new knowledge and experience with prior knowledge and experience. The degree of independence should be considered in the examination of each model of independent learning which is described in this paper.

Independent Learning

Malcolm Knowles (1975) has identified three key assumptions about

independent or self-directed learning. These assumptions are:

1. Pro-active learners who take the initiative learn more than passive learners. (p. 14)
2. Independent learning is a more natural approach to adult learning given the nature of adult psychological development. (p. 14)
3. Lifelong learning is an essential component in modern society. (pp. 15-16)

If these assumptions are accepted, independent learning must be viewed as a valid and effective approach within adult education systems. The models presented are based in varying degrees on these assumptions and the assumption that they will be used with adults who are capable of functioning autonomously.

The Models for Independent Learning

These models display different characteristics of independent learning. The extent of independence in relation to content and/or process should be considered in each case. If a particular model is to be considered for use, both the content of learning and the nature of prospective students should be examined to ensure appropriate implementation.

Of the following five models, Competency-Based Education is the only model which is used for introductory work in any content area. The other four models work best, although not always exclusively, in certain advanced content situations where the basic content has already been covered. The following descriptions are brief summaries of the models with the inclusion of the most important aspects for distance education.

Nondirective Instruction

Cyril Houle (1972) describes "tutorial teaching" in several patterns, but his fourth pattern may be useful to independent learners in areas of personal growth and change (Tough, 1982, p. 109). Houle describes this approach as

nondirective instruction because "the seeker must find his answers within himself" (p. 100).

The "tutor" in this situation must be able to devote his or her attention solely to the needs of the learner. Like a therapist or counsellor in the counselling style of Carl Rogers (1961), the learner must be trusted to experience and to engage in the process of becoming, of confirming or making real his own potentialities (p. 55).

This is clearly a process of support. The tutor makes the learner aware of appropriate resources and provides appropriate planning support to assist in the learning process. Further assistance can be provided through discussion and useful feedback. The learner must take the initiative while the tutor supports the initiative.

This is an excellent approach for non-credit situations. It has considerable merit where the content goals are unclear to the student and tutor alike.

Learning Contracts

Malcolm Knowles (1976) in his books on self-directed learning has provided the most comprehensive and useful description for independent learning contracts in higher education situations for adults. Although other educators of adults and children have discussed and utilized this approach, Knowles' descriptions remain the most frequently cited.

In this model, learners negotiate an appropriate learning activity with the teacher. Learners work with the teacher to:

1. Establish the precise nature of the learning need.
2. Set specific objectives.
3. Determine learning resources and process.

4. Determine documentation required for evaluation.
5. Provide appropriate resource support.
6. Develop evaluation processes.

The teacher provides a support to the process and performs ongoing tasks in relation to need identification, resource identification, the learning plan, "monitoring", and evaluation.

The learner agrees to assume responsibility and, in a class context, to share with other learners. Each student enters with his own particular interest as in Figure 1.

This is an excellent method for teaching skills in professional or vocational situations. It also provides the learner with an excellent guide for future learning activities.

(Insert Figure 1)

"The Tip of the Iceberg"

Allen Tough's model is quite different from the previous models, although all five models have been influenced by Tough's (1971, 1979) research and other writings (Tough, 1981). Tough (1980) has stated in a program of videotapes and written materials that classroom learning is only "the tip of the iceberg". Because most learning happens outside of the class sessions, it is possible to foster independence in the learning external to regular class sessions.

Tough's classes are characterized by the instructor's coverage of essential, "core" material through the utilization of good adult education techniques, plus the initiation and stimulation of independent learning activities. Sharing among the instructor and students and feedback on learning activities are also evident.

Each student is required to pursue independent learning activities, to read

a certain number of books from a carefully selected bibliography, and to submit a written summary of learning for evaluation by the instructor. In this way, each student is encouraged to pursue his/her own interests in a "free-flowing" approach outside of class while evidence is provided of the learning through the written summary. The classroom provides a common core of experience (See Figure 2).

(Insert Figure 2)

The Individual and the Group

Virginia Griffin (1980) has developed a model which incorporates the individual's need to learn and grow, but it is a model which also considers the value of groups for learners as support systems. As this adult educator utilizes her model in the context of a course on group processes, it is a most appropriate mixture of individual and group activities.

The initial class session enables students to identify areas of interest in the course context. Students become aware of each other's needs in order to work together where appropriate or to provide resource information. They may work in various sized groups or as individuals. The responsibility to share is paramount as groups and individuals take responsibility for class presentations. Class time in Figure 3 provides opportunities for sharing and synthesis. The sheer scope of knowledge (and skill) in certin courses makes this valuable, but the individual needs of learners are recognized as paramount.

(Insert Figure 3)

Competency-Based Education

This model has emerged from the desire to permit students to determine

their own pace of learning and to provide efficient training programmes in technological areas. James Parker (1981) and Ruth Nickse (1980) provide excellent background for those who wish to explore the model further.

Desired competencies or skills are identified by experts, and learning packages are developed with appropriate materials (written, audio visual, etc.). Learners work at their own pace - asking for help when needed. Teachers monitor and evaluate performance and permit the student to proceed to a new package. Students can begin and finish at any time as they learn enough to complete requirements. All content is prescribed and required.

There are no need for class sessions with the possible exception of orientations. The term is more flexible within reasonable limits. Each student's skill level upon entry, combined with the ability to learn, will determine the time of course completion.

(Insert Figure 4)

Concluding Comments

These models can be considered for utilization based upon the nature of the content and the learner or learners who become involved. It is not necessary to believe that we should always have enough students to run a class, nor do we need to force every student into a restrictive class context.

Nondirective tutorial teaching and learning contracts provide two alternative approaches to classes for one-to-one teaching. The learning contract is particularly useful for students who have a clear sense of direction and wish to achieve specific goals. The nondirective model works when students do not have a clear focus at the beginning and where an exploratory approach to the learning process is beneficial.

Tough (1980) and Griffin (1980) provide good models for group-based

situations. Tough's model can be used where there is core material to be shared by all, while Griffin's emphasis is on group support.

The competency-based model suggests that we can be flexible, particularly for learners at a distance. Correspondence materials can be made available on a learner paced basis. This model can work only when people must have or desire certain specific skills.

Choose the model which will work for you and your learners. Learn more about how to use the model effectively from the resources included in the reference list.

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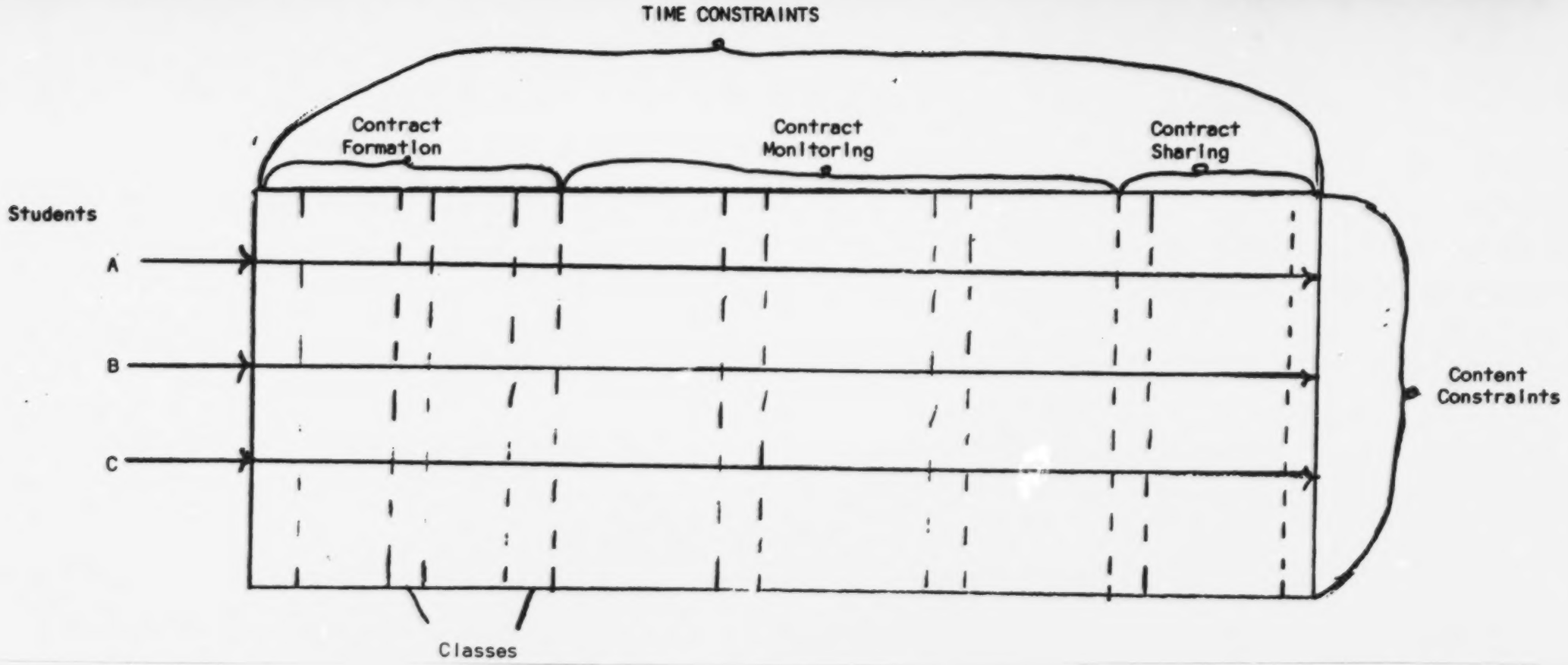

Figure 1 - Learning Contracts

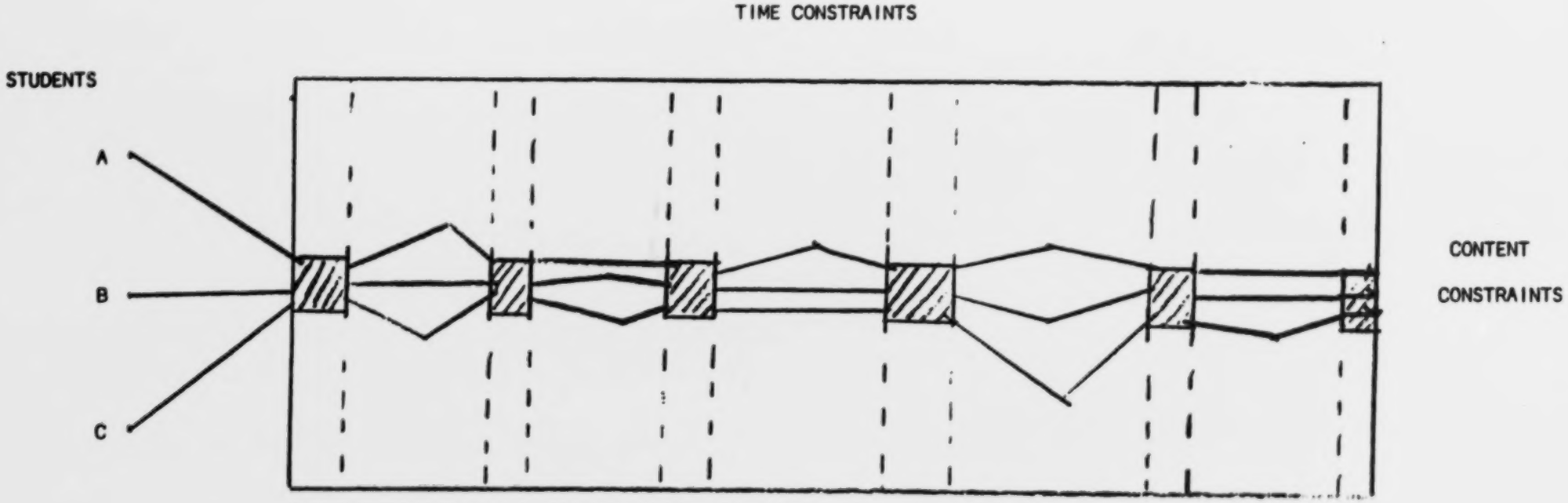

Figure 2 - "The tip of the iceberg"

TIME CONSTRAINTS

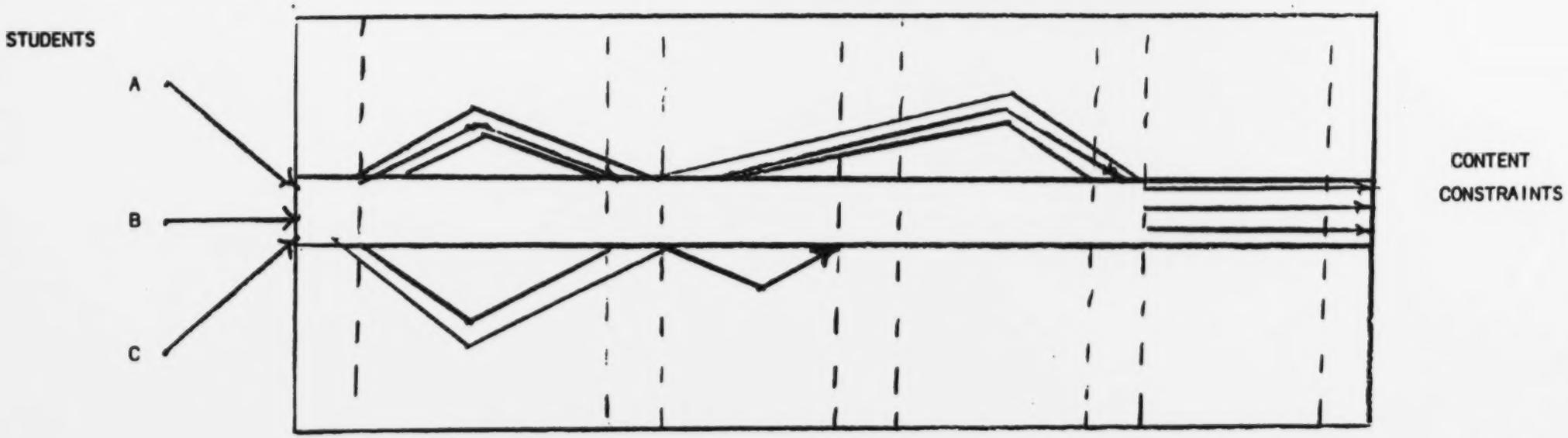

Figure 3 - The Individuals and the groups

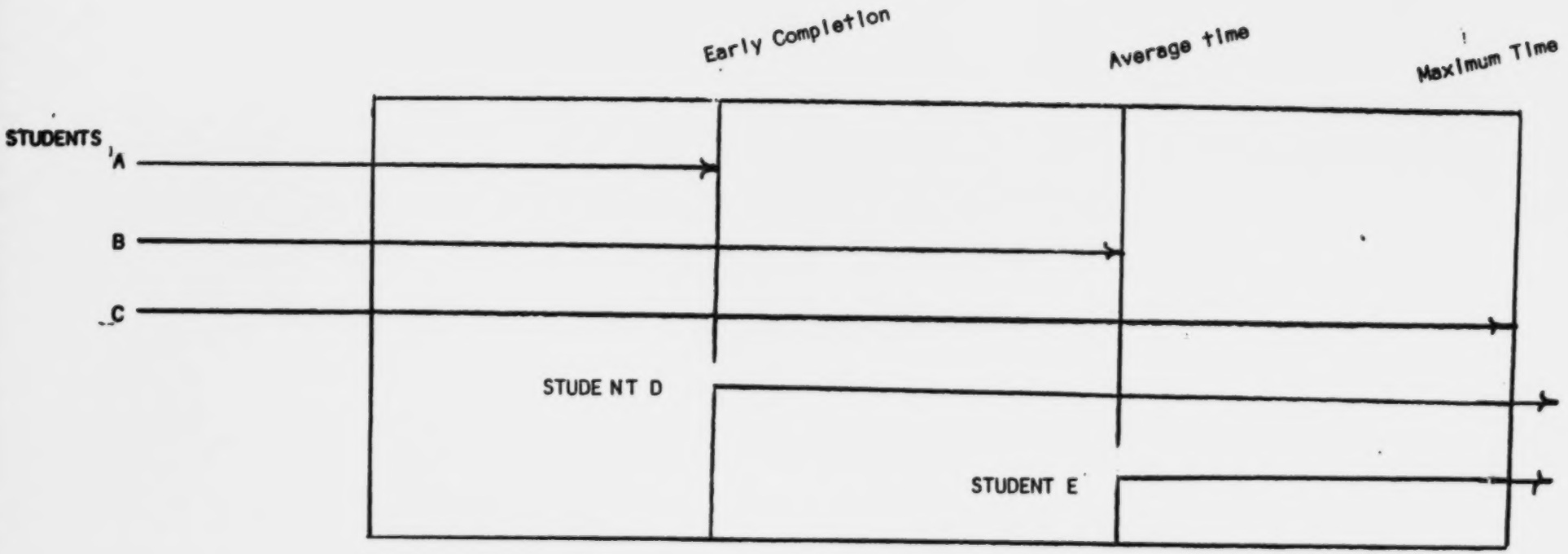

Figure 4 - Competency-based education